Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean

Before the age of Industrial Revolution, the great Asian civilisations – whether located in the Middle East, India, South-East Asia, or the Far East – constituted areas not only of high culture but also of advanced economic development. They were the First World of human societies.

This book examines one of the driving forces of that historical period: the long chain of oceanic trade which stretched from the South China Sea to the eastern Mediterranean, passing through a series of rich urban emporia. It also looks at the natural complement of the seaborne commerce, its counterpart in the caravan trade. In analytical terms, the book emphasises the methods of multi-dimensional history by highlighting the intricate relationship between space, time and structure. Its main achievement is to show how socially determined demand derived from cultural habits and interpretations operated through the medium of market forces and relative prices. It points out, for the first time, the unique and limiting features of Asian commercial capitalism, and shows how the contribution of Asian merchants was valued universally, in reality if not legally and formally.

Professor Chaudhuri’s book, based on more than twenty years’ research and reflection on pre-modern trade and civilisations, is a landmark in the analysis and interpretation of Asia’s historical position and development.
Plate 1. Map of the world, from J.H. van Linschoten, *His Discours of Voyages unto the Easte and West Indies*, 1598.
Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean

An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750

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Preface

To turn to a general historical study of past civilisations after sixteen years of documentary and archival research is not an easy decision. The completion of my work on the English East India Company in the summer of 1975 left me with considerable uncertainty about the future direction in which I should go. A huge amount of material which I had collected still awaited further investigation and analysis, especially on the social aspects of the early European presence in Asia. At the same time, the urge to escape for a while from the rigours of a long scholastic incarceration was very strong. Several factors encouraged me to move in the direction of the present study. In the spring of 1975 I met Fernand Braudel for the first time in Prato, during the Settimana di Studi at the Francesco Datini Institute, of which he is the President. Braudel and his wife received me with kindness and expressed an interest in seeing my current research, still unpublished at that time. He himself was then working on the last two volumes of Civilisation matérielle with the active support of his wife, and it was evident that a vast historical canvas, a work of great inspiration, was slowly taking shape. The sessions of the Datini Institute that year were devoted to world monetary history from the thirteenth century to the eighteenth. As I listened to the large collection of detailed papers presented, it occurred to me that a single work dealing with the general theme of long-distance trade and the role of money in pre-modern societies might fill a lacuna that still existed in the historiography of early trade.

In the autumn and winter of the same year, I was able to spend six months travelling in India, the Middle East, and South East Asia, and to visit some of the ancient towns and cities which were once prominent in the caravan and maritime trade of the Indian Ocean. The contrasting images of those journeys still convey to my mind the impression of a world that has almost vanished from contemporary Western Europe, a world inhabited by mankind for several millennia. Only once, in 1979 while walking through the streets of Ciudad Rodrigo in Spain, did I feel that I was face to face with the still-living past. The road that runs from Delhi to Agra, and then to Ajmer, Jodhpur and Gujarat, follows the old caravan route, often marked by tall league-towers, as do also the roads from Tehran to Isfahan, Shiraz, Yazd, and Kirman. To travel along these roads is to experience at first hand the simultaneous existence of the harsh realities of the old civilisation, the ancien régime, and its
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finest achievements. The exquisite lake-side marble pavilions of the Mughal emperors at Ajmer are flanked by the view of the precipitous mountain fortress, the scene of many bloody massacres, and an uncompromising instrument of military power. The awesome landscape of North India is only marginally softened by its fertile cornfields; but there is nothing comparable in the wide expanse of rocks, sand, and dried-out salt lakes which make up the Iranian plateau. The only sign of life is the occasional flock of sheep, a desert breed accustomed to conditions of extreme aridity. The glittering golden-domed shrine of Qumm rises above the empty plains as a magnificent tribute to the ascetical devotion of Islam. The lake palace at Udaipur, built in the early eighteenth century, has the classic outlines of Mughal architecture from the period of Shah Jahan, though it was the residence of a Hindu prince. Its interior gardens, of ravishing beauty and elegance, recall the parterres of Mughal gardens, though transformed by Rajasthani sensibilities. I saw the lake palace during a North Indian spring as the overhead sun was pushing the day temperature towards the 35°C range. A few weeks later I was in Isfahan. Snow had not yet melted on the surrounding mountains. In the courtyard of the Madrase Madar-i-Shah, the spring blossoms were just beginning to appear on the almond and cherry trees. The stately plane trees planted in that courtyard garden of perfect geometric proportions were still bare against the turquoise-tiled dome. In 1677 John Fryer travelled from Surat to Isfahan by sea and land. His descriptions recorded the impact made by the Iranian primate city on someone well-acclimated to the sights of large trading towns:

thus attended we were brought over a most Magnificent Bridge with Arches over our Heads, and on both sides Rails and Galleries to view the River, the cloisters whereof were Paved with broad Marble ... which led us to a stately large Street, continued on the other side with equal Gallantry of Buildings and Trees, till we were carried under their Lofty-Ceiled and Stately-Erected Buzzars ... which is, I confess, the surprizingest piece of Greatness in Honour of Commerce the whole World can boast of, our Burses being but Snaps of Buildings to these famous Buzzers. (Fryer, II, 240–1)

The difference between the Indian adaptation of Islamic artistic tradition and the purely Islamised Iran is clearly visible, and yet the contrast is nothing like as strong as in the case of civilisations one meets in South East Asia. The sight of whitewashed Buddhist temples with multi-coloured roofing tiles and ornate Chinese religious shrines is as evocative of the cultural watershed between the west and the east in the Indian Ocean as the landscape itself, with its deep, slow-moving rivers and flooded rice fields.

The visual impressions brought back from that period of Asian travel gradually strengthened my earlier idea of undertaking a general study of long-distance trade, markets, and merchants in the context of different societies and civilisations. However, after I had written three preliminary draft chapters the plan was modified as a result of a suggestion from Robin Derricourt and the Cambridge University Press that the study might be directed more specifically
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at the origin, development, and structure of Indian Ocean trade before 1800. The suggestion came at a time when new undergraduate courses were introduced examining the comparative features of the pre-modern economic system of Asia. I am grateful to the Syndics of the Press for accepting my draft proposals in outline and to Robin Derricourt for constant encouragement while progress on the work was held up by many other academic commitments. In terms of historical methodology, the present study is very different from my Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company. The latter was an attempt to analyse long-distance trade and commercial decision-making in terms of rigorous quantitative techniques. The series of statistics compiled from the original records demonstrates that pre-modern trade was not a matter of chance but incorporated systematic, rational processes as well. That conclusion is supported by this study also, with the additional discovery that cultural values and contrasting social habits contributed as much to pre-modern economic exchange as did purely economic factors. The present work attempts to examine this constant interaction between the rationality of commercial decisions, financial aspirations, and the larger elements of causality embedded in the human society and the environment.

A special word of thanks is due to M.A. Cook, who read the entire typescript and offered many helpful suggestions and criticisms. His vast knowledge of early Islamic sources and terms has been readily available to me, and I am grateful to him for bringing to my knowledge a number of interesting references. I must thank Gerald Hawting for checking my Roman transliteration of Arabic script, though I have not always followed orthodox conventions for their own sake. For assistance in Chinese history I have constantly turned to W.S. Atwell and benefited greatly from his detailed analysis of China’s monetary economy. Roland Oliver’s interest in the comparative history of civilisations was a steady source of encouragement and support. My pupils, both undergraduates and research students, have always sustained my work with their own studies and ideas. I remember with particular pleasure the response of my class in 1979, when I presented a lecture course on this subject for the first time. Finally, I should like to thank A.G. Hopkins, who made many useful suggestions for improving the final presentation of the main arguments.

London, January 1984
Abbreviations

IOR    India Office Records (the records division of The India Office Library and Records, The British Library)
PRO    Public Record Office